

# The Final Ending

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Summary: Sequel to 'The Final Animorphs' Another dark fic by me, but has a sappy element, too

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## By: Forlay

I leaned back in my chair, pushing the crew reports I had been reading away from me. I checked the clock on the wall: 1:00 AM. Way too late to be up reading crew reports. But I couldn't go to sleep. Too many close calls lately. My ship, normally quietly humming as it operates, was now clanking and rumbling at random.

><font> "What I wouldn't give for an Andalite space dock right about now," I muttered under my breath, when my door chime rang.<font>

><font> I attempted to push my hair back out of my face.

"Enter."<font>

><font> In the doorway stood my <em>shorm <em>and fellow warrior, Alaxia-Reshput-Vestree. "Alaxia, anything wrong?"

><font> No, Rachel, but we have a class one communication from an undisclosed place, and the caller refuses to identify himself.

&gt;<font>

><font> I sighed and turned to the small message board embedded in the table. "Put it through."<font>

><font> Alaxia went out onto the bridge, a moment later the monitor flickered to life.<font>

><font> "Commander Rachel?" a male voice asked.<font>

><font> I was still waiting for the static to clear on my monitor, so I couldn't quite make out who was talking. "This is she. Who's calling?" Under my breath I added, "Damn static."<font>

><font> "What? You don't recognize me?"<font>

><font> The static finally began to clear and I could see who was

calling. "Marco! Where the hell are you?!"<font>  
><font> "The TalonClaw doesn't sound so good over there," he said, avoiding my question. "Anything wrong?"<font>  
><font> I rolled my eyes, "No, Marco, we're all just peachy keen over here," I said sarcastically. "Now, where are you?"<font>  
><font> "I'm afraid I can't tell you that, Rachel," he said, looking a little guilty.<font>  
><font> "Marco, can you hold on a second? I need to check with my engine room about something." He nodded and I hit the 'mute' button on the monitor. I opened up my ship communication console and said, "Engine room? Do we have Zero Space engines yet?"<font>  
><font> "Just barely, Commander. I wouldn't advise using them yet," Came the voice of my chief engineer, Randgal-Fluttia-Streab. An Andalite, of course, but the communication console translated it into normal speech.<font>  
><font> "We're gonna have to," I said. "I think Marco's been captured by the Andalites and they're trying to get a lock on us."<font>

><font> He sighed. "Give me five minutes, commander, to get them a little more stable."<font>  
><font> "You have three, out." I turned back to Marco. "Sorry about that, but I needed to check in to see if they could possibly keep the engines from making so much damn noise."<font>  
><font> "I understand."<font>  
><font> "How's the TigerFist doing? Better than TalonClaw, I hope."<font>  
><font> He shook his head, "Unfortunately, no. It was totaled when we had to make an emergency crash landing."<font>  
><font> "Where?"<font>  
><font> "The planet I'm on now."<font>  
><font> "Ah. I see. Why can't you tell me where you are, Marco? Are you with the Andalites?"<font>  
><font> Just before Marco could answer, his end of the communication was broken off. "Damn," I cursed.<font>  
><font> Suddenly, from the bridge, my first officer Cusdo-Hokoi-Vesta came over ship communications, "Commander Rachel! An Andalite assault fleet has been detected, it's on an intercept course!"<font>

><font> "Shit, they *do* have him," I cursed. I activated my end of the messageboard. "I don't care what the engine room says, get to Z-Space now!"<font>  
><font> "Yes, Commander," Cusdo said.<font>  
><font> I pushed my hair back one more time and quickly exited my study room and entered the bridge.<font>  
><font> We'll be in Z-Space in one minute, Commander, &gt; Cacitini, my helmsman said.<font>  
><font> "Can you put the Andalite fleet up on the screen?"<font>

><font> Commander! The head of the Andalite fleet is trying to contact us, &gt; Trax, my operations officer, said.<font>  
><font> "Put them through," I said tersely. "Belay the command to go to Z-Space, but make sure we can get there as soon as I say."<font>

><font> I turned to face the screen at the front of the bridge as it flickered to life and showed an Andalite face. "Commander Rachel, we have your fellow rebel ship in custody, stand down now and prepare to be boarded."<font>  
><font> "Over my dead body," I replied. "Cacitini? Get us out of here!"<font>  
><font> Yes, Commander, &gt; Cacitini said, sounding slightly smug.

The ship lurched as the Z-Space engines activated and shot us into Z-Space.<font>

><font> We're safely into Z-Space, &gt; Cacitini announced. There was a sigh of relief from everyone on the bridge.<font>

><font> "Any possibility of them following us?"<font>

><font> No, Commander. They were not expecting the sudden jump. It will be at least ten minutes before they could make the jump, and we'll be long gone by then. &gt;<font>

><font> I sat down in my chair and leaned back. "Well, this has been an eventful morning. And it's not even two yet. I'm going to my quarters. Cusdo? You have the bridge."<font>

><font> Yes, Commander, &gt; he said as I exited the bridge.<font>

><font> As I was walking down the corridor to my quarters, I heard Alaxi trot up beside me.<font>

><font> What's wrong, Rachel? &gt;<font>

><font> I sighed. "Everything, Alaxi. I mean, we've been running from the Andalites for over a year, even though we carried out their damn orders to kill Jake and Cassie, my ship's a mess, falling apart at the seams, I'm sure the crew is planning a mutiny, and now Marco's been captured." I hit the console to let me into my quarters. "That answer the question?"<font>

><font> What are you going to do about it? &gt; Alaxi asked, knowing me well enough to know that when things aren't going right, I'm going to fix it.<font>

><font> "Any word on that Andalite fleet around Earth?"<font>

><font> Only a quarter of the fleet is left, many have been called out to fight the Yeerks. &gt;<font>

><font> See, the Andalites had put an entire fleet in Earth's solar system to keep Marco and I from returning there to see our families and getting repairs done to our ships.<font>

><font> "That's still 50 ships too many." There were originally 200 ships in the fleet. "So, next step, nobody happened to think of tracing that call I got earlier?"<font>

><font> Who was that, anyway? &gt;<font>

><font> "Marco. I think he's been captured."<font>

><font> Nobody's tried yet, but I'll get right on it. &gt;<font>

><font> "Thanks, Alaxi."<font>

><font> No problem, Rachel. But get some sleep all right? &gt;<font>

><font> I smiled. "You sound like..." I trailed off. I hadn't thought of that in years.<font>

><font> I sound like who? &gt;<font>

><font> "Umm...my mother. And I will. Thanks."<font>

><font> No problem, Rachel. &gt; She left quickly.<font>

><font> I couldn't believe who I nearly said Alaxi sounded like! I'd nearly said she sounded like Tobias. Years ago, when just before we met the Ellimist for the first time, I went to go see Tobias about something. He told me to go home and get some sleep. I didn't realize how much I missed him until I was about to mention him.<font>

><font> Wiping away tears that were threatening to fall, I walked over to my closet and pulled out my nightgown, really just a large long sleeved T-shirt. I changed out of my skin tight black and sliver cat suit uniform into the shirt, dimmed the lights in my quarters as I laid down in my bed and went to sleep.<font>

><font> Rachel! Rachel, wake up! &gt;<font>

><font> I sat up with a start when I heard Alaxi's voice. I heard her

ringing the door chime frantically. "I'm up!" I shouted. I threw back the covers and walked to the door. I looked at the clock before I unlocked it: five AM.<font>

><font> "Alaxi, do you know what time it is?" I demanded when I let her in.<font>

><font> Sorry, Rachel. But I figured you'd want to see this right away. &gt; She handed me a pad. I scanned down it quick.<font>

><font> "Marco's with the Andalite fleet near Earth? Shit. That doesn't help us at all, now does it?"<font>

><font> No, &gt; Alaxi said. Although we managed to hack into an Andalite news brief: three quarters of the 50 ships are being called away tomorrow. &gt;<font>

><font> I quickly did the math in my head. "So about 12 ships will be left?"<font>

><font> Yes. Including the one Marco's on. &gt;<font>

><font> "That's still alot of ships for the TalonClaw to handle alone. Wait. Is the TigerFist there, or is it true that it was destroyed?"<font>

><font> According to what we got from the trace, the communications system that was used to make the call was the same kind as on the TigerFist. However, at least five ships in that fleet would have the same system. &gt;<font>

><font> I shook my head to try and clear it. It was still a little fuzzy with sleep. "Try and find out if his ship is there. Bring us out of Z-Space if necessary. I want to know for sure before I order us to go there. I'll be out to the bridge in a minute, just give me a chance to shower and change."<font>

><font> Alaxi let herself out as I walked to my closet, grabbed a uniform, and went into my small bathroom.<font>

><font> 15 minutes later, I was showered, dressed, and on my way to the bridge.<font>

><font> Rachel, we have confirmation, &gt; Alaxi said as I eased myself into my chair. The TigerFist is at Earth. It's one of five ships orbiting Earth directly. The rest are spread throughout the solar system. &gt;<font>

><font> I made the type of decision that I've never been good at. Jake was good, but I've never been able to make them well. "We're going to Earth. Cacitini? Jump to Z-Space as soon as you can, I don't like hanging out here nearly defenseless." I taped the messageboard in the arm of my chair. "Randgal?"<font>

><font> "Yes, Commander?"<font>

><font> "Get me as many weapons as you can as fast as you can. We're heading to Earth's solar system, and there's going to be at least 12 fully armed Andalite ships there, and I want to be able to defend ourselves."<font>

><font> "I'm on it, Commander."<font>

><font> I leaned back in my chair. "ETA, Cacitini?"<font>

><font> 27 hours, 43 minutes, Commander. &gt;<font>

><font> I sighed. "Guess we're in for a long ride."<font>

><font> I tried to sit on the bridge. Really, I did. But I'm not a person who can sit still for long periods of time. I paced the bridge, looked over the shoulder's of various crew members, no one telling me to back away except Alaxi. Did she ever get some startled looks for that. Everyone knows we're <em>shorms</em>, and she's told me off more than once, but it still takes the rest of them by surprise.

><font> We stayed in Z-Space for 25 hours, leaving the last two to be traveled in normal space. We wouldn't have the element of surprise, but with the state the TalonClaw was in, that was impossible. But at

least Randgal and the rest of the engineers had been working non-stop and we were up to 75% weapons capacity. Enough to do a fair ammount of damage.<font>

><font> "Be sure to keep shields up," I ordered as we neared Earth's solar system. "And keep up those scans, I want to know the fleet's on us before they do."<font>

><font> This was the nerve wracking part. No longer were we waiting to arrive at enemy territory, we were <em>in<em> enemy territory. Waiting for them to find us, or us to find them.

><font> Commander...I think they've found us, &gt; Alaxi said.<font>

><font> "Damn," I cursed. "Go to evasive maneuvers, Cacitini. Power up weapons, but don't fire unless they do first. We're not going to be looking for a fight."<font>

><font> Commander, one of the ships is trying to contact us, &gt; Zanati said.<font>

><font> I sighed. Looks like we were gonna get a fight after all. "Put him through."<font>

><font> "Commander Rachel, I presume," the Andalite on the screen said.<font>

><font> "If you're going to order us to stand down, forget about it," I said defiantly.<font>

><font> "On the contrary, Commander. I wish to join you."<font>

><font> "Why don't I believe you?"<font>

><font> "But I tell the truth, Commander. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Vestef-Jania-Tolup, Tactical Officer and acting captain of the Nebula Striker."<font>

><font> "'Acting' captain?" I questioned.<font>

><font> "Yes, the crew committed mutiny against the captain and first officer. The electorate has gone mad, and the captain and first officer insisted on following orders."<font>

><font> I glanced to Alaxi, did she buy it? She nodded ever so slightly. "Okay, let's just say that this is all true. Can you help us get to Earth?"<font>

><font> "Yes," Vestef said. "The rest of the fleet does not know of our mutiny. I can say we have captured you and are taking you in. When we reach the forces at Earth, we can repair your ship, then when your ship is fully repaired, strike."<font>

><font> "Sounds like a plan," I said.<font>

><font> "We shall attach a tractor beam to your ship. Power down your engines." I nodded to Cacitini. "I shall sever communications now," Vestef said. "Communications are being monitored periodically, if we're found talking while in transit, our cover would be lost."<font>

><font> "Gotcha," I said, and nodded to Zanati to cut the link.<font>

><font> Everyone on the bridge was tense as the Nebula Striker pulled us closer to Earth. Part of me felt Vestef was telling the truth, but I was suspicious by nature. I couldn't help but feel this could be a trap.<font>

><font> In a little over an hour, we reached the main fleet stationed at Earth. There I saw the TigerFist in a similar position, being held by a tractor beam by a Dome Ship.<font>

><font> "You're ship will be docking with Commander Marco's," Vestef said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. "You two and your crews will be allowed to travel between ships, but no more."<font>

><font> I felt a lurch as my ship was docked with another, presumably the TigerFist. I rushed off the bridge to the docking bay.<font>

><font> Once I was there, I impatiently waited for the doors to open.<font>  
><font> "Marco!" I shouted once the doors were open. I ran to him and wrapped him in a hug, much to my surprise and his. And, even more surprising, he returned the hug.<font>  
><font> "Rachel, this is a surprise," he said with a grin. "How've you been?"<font>  
><font> I made a face, "Awful. Until now." I hugged him again. "It's great to see you again."<font>  
><font> "Same to you," Marco said.<font>  
><font> "Let's go to my quarters, we can talk there," I suggested. "I wouldn't be surprised if your ship is bugged, but nobody's been on mine yet."<font>  
><font> Once we reached my quarters, I asked him, "Do you know we have allies here?"<font>  
><font> "Allies? Who?"<font>  
><font> "The Nebula Striker crew," I answered. "They mutinied against their captain and first officer because, to quote T.O. Vestef, the electorate has gone mad."<font>  
><font> "And you're trusting this guy?" Marco asked.<font>  
><font> "Yes, I am. Without him, we would never have been able to get here. He's going to arrange for our ships to be fully repaired, and once that's done, we attack this fleet."<font>  
><font> "You do realize it'll be three ships versus eleven, right?" he asked. "Unless your ship managed to keep all your fighters, 'cause all of mine have been destroyed."<font>  
><font> "Mine and Alaxi's fighters are still operational, so it'll be five against eleven."<font>  
><font> "Oh, that makes me feel <em>so<em> much better."  
><font> I rolled my eyes, "Being a POW hasn't softened your attitude much, has it?"<font>  
><font> He grinned. "Nope."<font>  
><font> I rolled my eyes, "Figures."<font>  
><font> "Where've you been hiding out?" Marco asked. "It took them nearly a week to find you."<font>  
><font> I shrugged. "Here, there, everywhere. We haven't set foot on a planet for a month and a half. The Andalites have put out rewards for us. Dead or alive. Just like some old western."<font>  
><font> "Ouch. They want us bad. But why? We carried out their damn orders, even if they were a little late."<font>  
><font> "The whole jail break thing?" I suggested.<font>  
><font> "Possibly. Are they looking for us, us, or our crews us?"<font>  
><font> "Us. Rachel and Marco. The rewards say nothing about our crews. Probably some stupid discriminatory thing. I don't think they ever liked us, and were just waiting for us to mess up."<font>

><font> He sighed. "And in their eyes, we did. We refused to carry out orders, and then broke out of jail."<font>  
><font> "But it looks like we've persuaded a few people to join our cause. Perhaps there's more out there."<font>  
><font> Suddenly, T.O. Vestef entered the room, followed by about five other Andalites. Good to see you again, Commander Rachel. Commander Marco, I'm Vestef-Jania-Tolup. I have good news. My engineers are working with the engineers on each of your ships and both shall be fully repaired by tomorrow afternoon, including new fighters. Also, these Andalites are from the Dome Ship you're currently docked with. They'd like to join our cause and can help get your ships away from the Dome Ship when we're ready to make our

escape. &gt;<font>

><font> "Tomorrow afternoon?" I asked. "That doesn't give us much time to plan. Get everyone who wants to join us into the meeting room here where we can plan our escape." Vestef nodded curtly and left.<font>

><font> "I'll go get my crew," Marco said. "Meet ya' there."<font>

><font> Once he was gone I activated ship wide communications. "All crew members report to the meeting room. This is a mandatory meeting for all crew members except engineers currently working on repairing engines and weapons. Get to the meeting room ASAP." I turned off the communication system and hurried to the meeting room.<font>

><font> Once my crew was in, Marco's crew arrived, followed by Vestef's and the assorted Andalite's he found that wanted to join us. Somehow, we managed to fit everyone in.<font>

><font> Marco, Vestef and I stood at the front of the room. We all had well disciplined crews so we didn't need to bother calling our little meeting to order.<font>

><font> "Tomorrow afternoon we're making our escape," I said. "Engineers from the TigerFist, TalonClaw and Nebula Striker are working as we speak to get the TigerFist and TalonClaw in fighting condition. This meeting is to discuss possible battle tactics."<font>

><font> Attack straight out! &gt; An Andalite I didn't recognize shouted. Probably one of Vestef's crew. I smiled despite myself. Whoever this was sounded alot like me.<font>

><font> "Probably not the smartest idea," Marco said. "The point of this is to stay alive to fight the Yeerks."<font>

><font> It's already been decided that those of us stationed on the Star Fire shall be releasing your ships,<font>

><font>correct? &gt; Another Andalite I didn't know asked.<font>

><font> "If the Star Fire is the Dome Ship we're docked with, yes," I answered. "Unfortunately, I don't think you'll be able to join us on our escape unless you can manage to get to a fighter."<font>

><font> We'll take care of that, &gt; the Andalite replied.<font>

><font> Once our ships are released, the best course of action would be to make a run for it and get into Z-Space as fast as possible, &gt; Alaxi said. I love a good fight as much as anyone, despite being female, &gt; she added as she sent a dagger look to a few of the guys who were giving her dirty looks.<font>

><font> Alaxi had never been widely accepted and she was still the only female, besides me, in the Andalite military. Not that either of us are really considered affiliated with the Andalites anymore.<font>

><font> But even though we believe things should be handled different ways, we'd still be fighting our fellow Andalites. Fight to defend ourselves, yes. Look for a fight, no. I'm sure none of us want the blood of our brothers on our tail blades. Or hands, &gt; she added, looking at Marco and I.<font>

><font> I glanced at Marco and Vestef who both nodded. "Sounds like the best plan to me," I said. "Unless someone has a better idea, we'll go with that." No one said anything. "All right. Go ahead and return to your duties. And speak of this to no one, not even among yourselves. We can't be sure if any of our ships have been bugged yet."<font>

><font> As everyone was exiting the room, I heard one Andalite say, I

can't believe this rebellion. First, two humans are leading it, one of them being female, then a female suggests the escape plan we'll be using. ><font>

><font> "Who said that?" I demanded. Everyone froze. I saw one of them try and slip out the door. It was the one who'd suggested an attack earlier, and most likely the one who'd said it.<font>

><font> "Stop right there," I said as I pushed my way through the crowd. Alaxi was right behind me, emerald eyes blazing in anger.<font>

><font> I grabbed the Andalite by the arm. "Listen, you. I can handle you not liking me. Hell, you can even not care for Alaxi, but you'd better watch who you're dissing because they're female, because if either Alaxi or I hear you speaking against females, no one will be able to help you." I let him go and he got away from me as fast as he could.<font>

><font> "Don't you think that was a little harsh?" Marco asked.<font>

><font> "No."<font>

><font> No, > Alaxi and I said in unison.<font>

><font> Marco shook his head in amusement. "Rachel, can I talk to you for awhile. Alone?"<font>

><font> "Sure," I said, a little worried. "We can go back to my quarters. Cusdo?" I called. "You have the bridge."<font>

><font> "What's up?" I asked him once we were back in my quarters.<font>

><font> He sighed and sat down on the edge of my bed. "I don't know. I...well I haven't seen you, or another human, for five months. I wanted a chance to talk to someone who can actually talk back."<font>

><font> I smiled. "I know the feeling. My crew is great and all, but they all keep apart from me, as they would an Andalite commander. Except Alaxi, of course, but sometimes it would be nice to talk to someone with a sense of humor."<font>

><font> "I'm flattered you think so highly of me," he said with a smirk.<font>

><font> I sat down next to him on the bed. "Know who I found myself thinking of the other day?" I asked suddenly.<font>

><font> WHAT had made me bring <em>this<em> up?

><font> "Who?"<font>

><font> Oh, well, might as well keep going on this topic. "Tobias."<font>

><font> Marco nodded. "Being here, so close to home, brings back alot of memories, doesn't it?"<font>

><font> I nodded. I didn't dare speak, the tears welling up behind my eyes were threatening to fall.<font>

><font> Marco put an arm around me, which just made the tears want to fall more. "Hey, I know what you're feeling. I've done my share of crying over Jake and everyone while I've been held here. You're not alone."<font>

><font> I buried my face in his shoulder and let the tears start to fall. "Why did I let him die, Marco? Why did I let all of them die? I let them all down."<font>

><font> He took my face in his hands and looked into my eyes. "You did not let <em>anyone<em> down, Rachel. Got that? Tobias' death was an accident, and we did Jake and Cassie a favor when we destroyed their ship. They're free now, remember that."

><font> I pulled back from him and wiped my eyes. "I know that, Marco. But why can't I accept it?"<font>

><font> Marco pulled me back closer to him. Without warning, he



leaned close and kissed me, right on the lips.<font>  
><font> I pulled back away from him, shocked, and did the only thing  
I could think of doing at that point.<font>  
><font> I punched him.<font>  
><font> "Ow!" He yelled and put a hand up to his jaw.<font>

><font> "Oh, my God! Marco!"<font>  
><font> "What the hell did you do that for?!"<font>  
><font> "What the hell did you kiss me for?!"<font>  
> <font>"I don't know! It seemed like a good idea at the time!"<font>

><font> I sighed. "Come on, let's get you to medical bay to check  
that out. I think I may have broke a bone."<font>  
><font> "Thanks alot," he said. I wasn't sure if he was sincere or  
being sarcastic.<font>  
><font> We were out of the medical bay in 20 minutes. Turns out I had  
broken his jaw bone, just a mild fracture, and there wasn't anything  
the medical officer could do for him but prescribe some pain pills  
and suggest keeping his jaw wrapped and talk as little as  
possible.<font>  
><font> "And remember not to kiss Rachel anymore without permission,"  
he added under his breath, while wincing in pain.<font>  
><font> "And take care to remember that one," I told him as we walked  
back towards my quarters.<font>  
><font> "Which part? Not kissing you or kissing without  
permission?"<font>  
><font> "Kissing without permission," I said mischievously as we  
entered my quarters.<font>  
><font> "Excuse me?" Marco asked, following me in.<font>  
><font> "You heard me," I said. "You've been my closest friend ever  
since...you know when. And...I guess I shouldn't have punched you for  
that kiss. I should have been expecting it. And it wasn't half bad."  
We sat down on the couch.<font>  
><font> "Well, then, Commander Rachel. Requesting permission to kiss  
you as soon as the jaw you broke has healed."<font>  
><font> "Permission granted, Commander Marco. Now I suggest getting  
back to your own quarters and getting some rest."<font>  
><font> "Do I have to?" he complained like a little kid.<font>

><font> "unless you want a more severely broken jaw, yes."<font>

><font> "Aw, man. Well I guess I'll be seeing you."<font>  
><font> "Yep."<font>  
><font> "Bye."<font>  
><font> "Bye."<font>  
><font> After Marco left, I laid back on my bed think, <em>what the  
<em>hell\_ just happened?!\_ Yes, I liked Marco. But romantically?  
Well, possibly...no! Uh-uh! I was right to punch him!  
><font> I sat up. This was too much to think about in times like  
this. At least alone. I checked the clock on the wall: 9 AM. Alaxi  
should be off duty by now. She was just the person to talk to. A girl  
like her must have had guy problems at some point in her life.<font>

><font> I walked over to my desk and flipped up the messageboard from  
it's place in the desk. "Alaxi? You there?"<font>  
><font> A moment later she appeared on the screen. "Yes, I am here,  
Rachel. Anything wrong?"<font>  
><font> "I was wondering if you could come to my quarters so we could  
talk. You know, woman to woman."<font>  
><font> "Of course. I'm on my way."<font>

><font> Five minutes later, Alaxi was at my quarters. I saw Commander Marco heading towards his ship nursing a broken jaw, that wouldn't happen to be the reason you called me, would it? &gt;<font>

><font> I smiled, "You know me too well."<font>  
><font> What'd he do? &gt;<font>  
> <font>I sat down on the couch, "he kissed me."<font>  
><font> Alaxi's main eyes widened and her stalk eyes raised to their full height. So you punched him? &gt;<font>  
><font> "Of course I punched him. We were talking, I had one of the emotional breakdowns I tend to have every once in awhile, he kissed me, I punched him."<font>  
><font> Then what? &gt;<font>  
><font> "I took him to the medical bay, on the way back he said something like "And remember never to kiss Rachel again," and I said, 'At least not without permission.' Next thing I know, we're back here, he asks permission to kiss me as soon as his jaw's healed, and I said okay!"<font>  
><font> Do you want to kiss him again? &gt;<font>  
><font> "Yes...no...I don't know! That's why I called you. You wouldn't happen to have any insight into this, would you?"<font>

><font> I did have a similar experience once... &gt;<font>  
><font> "What'd you do?"<font>  
><font> I was...well, the equivalent of 18 Earth years at the time. I was running through my family's lands with one of my closest friends at the time, Trapsti-Palia-Malis-- &gt;<font>  
><font> "A male Andalite, I presume?" I still have trouble identifying male and female Andalite names.<font>  
><font> Yes, &gt; Alaxi answered. As we slowed to rest, he suddenly brushed his hand against my cheek. Which is our version of a kiss, you remember. &gt;<font>  
><font> I nodded. "What'd you do?"<font>  
><font> I snapped my tail forward and left a gash in his right arm. he still has a scar from what I hear, but I haven't talked to him, or seen him since then. &gt;<font>  
><font> I smiled. "That sounds very you. Doesn't help me much, since I can't just run away from him. I mean, a friendship like ours isn't going to die because of something like this. But what do you think I should do?"<font>  
><font> I've seen the way you act around him, and I believe you love him, Rachel. Not the way you love Tobias, you could never love anyone like you did him. Your love for Marco is different, but love just the same. And he obviously feels the same way. I think you should go for it. &gt;<font>  
><font> I thought about that for a minute. She was right. I loved Marco. What I had called close friendship really was love. I'd always love Tobias, and he'd always have a place in my heart, but I could love Marco, too.<font>  
><font> "You're right. I do love him," I said. "Why did you become a warrior? You're too smart for that."<font>  
><font> Alaxi smiled. I guess I just had to get away from the norm. &gt;<font>  
><font> I smiled, "Thanks, Alaxi."<font>  
><font> Anytime, Rachel. That all you needed? &gt;<font>  
><font> "Yeah, you can go if you want."<font>  
><font> Bye, &gt; she said and left.<font>  
><font> I felt the now familiar feeling of tears welling up behind my eyes. Alaxi and I had become <em>shorms</em> because we were so much alike. We both couldn't stand society's view of what we "should" do,

so we went into fighting. But there was a gently side to her. Perhaps it came from growing up in a society where women's roles were strictly defined while I was brought up knowing I could do anything I wanted. Whatever gave her that quality, it reminded me so much of Cassie.

><font> I must have dozed off because I was awakened by the incessant chirping from my messageboard.<font>

><font> I walked over to the wall where my board is and read the screen:<font>

><font> Incoming message. For: Commander Marco, Commander Rachel. Status:Medum. Accept?<font>

><font> "Yes," I said.<font>

><font> Vestef's face appeared on the screen. "Greetings Commanders," the recorded image of him said. "My engineers can no longer work with yours without raising suspicion. Your ships are in a form of solitary confinement. No one can enter, no one can leave. But all the necessary equipment was left on your ships, your engineers should be able to complete the repairs on schedule. When the repairs are completed or you have news to report, send me a low to medium priority recorded message, they're harder to detect." The message ended.<font>

><font> I looked in my mirror to see how I was doing. My hair was a mess, and my eyes red. I quickly re-braided my hair, splashed water on my face in the bathroom, then exited my quarters and walked towards the engine room.<font>

><font> "Everything still on schedule?" I asked as I entered the vast room at the back of the ship.<font>

> <font> Yes, Commander, &gt; Randgal said. I trust you've been informed of the situation with the Nebula Strikers engineers? &gt;<font>

><font> "Yes, I have. T.O. Vestef told me that everything should still be on schedule, but I wanted to see for myself."<font>

><font> Everything is, &gt; he assured me. If you'll excuse me, Commander, I need to get back to work. &gt;<font>

><font> "Of course," I said. I stayed for a few more minutes to be sure everything was in order, but soon grew bored. Nothing on this ship really interested me. Andalite technology was too far ahead of what I'd grown up with, I couldn't begin to understand it. All I cared about was whether it worked or not.<font>

><font> As I was exiting the engine room, ready to just roam the corridors, I got a thought speak message from Cusdo. Commander Rachel, please come to the bridge immediately. &gt;<font>

><font> I couldn't answer him, but I hurried to the nearest drop shaft.<font>

><font> A minute later, I was on the bridge. "What is it, Cusdo?"<font>

><font> Incoming message from the Star Fire. It's the captain. &gt;<font>

><font> "Damn," I swore under my breath. "Put it through."<font>

><font> The screen responded right away, clearly showing the Star Fire's captain, a nice change.<font>

><font> "Commander Rachel," he said gruffly. "Thank you for your promptness. We're still waiting for your fellow rebel--"<font>

><font> As if on cue, the screen divided in half, the Star Fire's captain on the left, Marco on the right.<font>

><font> "Sorry I'm late," Marco apologized. "Crew emergency." That probably wasn't true. Marco wasn't looking forward to speaking with

authorities any more than I was.<font>

><font> "I'm Captain Trana-Corrit-Rait," the captain introduced. "Now that we have both of you in custody, the Electorate has given me the task of interrogating you."<font>

><font> Behind me I heard my crew trying to make a quiet exit. They figured I wouldn't want them around during this.<font>

><font> "Stop!" Trana ordered. "Return to your posts. No one shall leave the bridge. As customary, the Commander shall be interrogated, perhaps even dishonored, in front of their crews.<font>

><font> Yes, sir, &gt; was the general reply from my crew.<font>

><font> I turned around to face them. "You want to leave? Go ahead. It's not like we're not in trouble already. I can handle this guy on my own, and it's pretty hard to dishonor someone like me, so you won't be missing anything." I turned back to Trana as I heard my crew leave the bridge. "My crew can choose for themselves whether they want to see me interrogated or not. Now, ask away."<font>

><font> Trana obviously wasn't prepared for me to do that, but tried not to let it show. "Do you know why you're currently being held?"<font>

><font> "Because you're a bunch of pompous idiots," Marco answered. I smiled, I was just about to say the same thing.<font>

><font> "More insubordination, Commander Marco? I believe that would add up to 10 counts for you to be tried for," Trana said.<font>

><font> "The hell with how many counts of insubordination we have," I said. "Get on with this 'interrogation', or I'll close this line and order my operations officer to block all incoming calls from your ship."<font>

><font> "He wouldn't," Trana said.<font>

><font> "Oh yes, he would," I affirmed. "We aren't scared of you or your all mighty Electorate anymore."<font>

><font> "Then I don't see the need to carry this interrogation further."<font>

><font> "Neither do I," I said. Trana abruptly cut the link, leaving Marco alone on the screen.<font>

><font> "We meet all the nicest people, don't we?" he asked.<font>

><font> "Everything still on schedule?"<font>

><font> He nodded. "If anything, they're ahead of schedule. Working together for a year and a half, and as fugitives for the last six of those month has made my engineers practically telepathic with each other."<font>

><font> "Cool," I said. "Talk to ya' later." I walked to the communications station at the back of the bridge and deactivated the screen. Then opened ship wide communications. "Bridge officers may now return to their posts," I announced. A moment later, the crew returned.<font>

><font> What did the captain want? &gt; Alaxi asked.<font>

><font> "He tried to interrogate Marco and I but...well, I guess we just weren't all that cooperative," I grinned. "Of course, if we don't escape tomorrow, Marco and I will be in deep shit for how we talked to Trana, and all the other things we've done, but I'm not even going to consider that possibility. Now, I have some reports to finish up. I'll be in my study room, Cusdo, you have the bridge."<font>

><font> Once I entered my study room, the quiet was shattered by the beeping of my message board.<font>

><font> Incoming Message. For: Commander Marco, Commander Rachel. Status: Low. Accept?"<font>

><font> By the time I finished reading the main screen, the beep had stopped. Low priority messages only beep for half a minute, medium priority beep for 1 and a half minutes, and high priorities beep until you answer.<font>  
><font> "Yes," I said to accept the message. This time it was written.<font>

Commanders:

><font> Must take utmost caution. Written messages safest now.<font>

><font> What did you say to Captain Trana? Whatever it was, it wasn't in our favor. The captain is taking you to the home world first thing tomorrow morning, 8 AM.<font>

><font> The Star Fire will have to release both your ships for a minute before it leaves in order to reattach you in a position more suitable for high speed travel. When this happens, you must leave immediately. The Night Striker will cover you, along with any fighters from the Star Fire and other ships in the area.<font>

><font> Do not attempt to contact me or each other until we are safely away, it's much too dangerous. Your ships may not be in the best fighting condition, but they can make it away from here fast enough.<font>

Vestef-Jania-Tolup, Tactical Officer

><font>Nebula Striker<font>

I sighed. This entire day had been destined to be a bad day. I quickly typed up a new, high priority, message to be sent to all the crew message boards. Basically just saying that we had until 8 AM, then we were out of here.

><font> I glanced at the clock on the wall: 8 PM. We'd been here for 12 hours, and in another 12, we'd be leaving, which made me feel like dirt. I didn't want to run away from Earth again. As long as I was here, I wanted to go down to the planet, Yeerks or no Yeerks. I may not be able to see my parents or sister, who knows if they're even still alive, but I could go down there, feel closer to them, visit Tobias' grave site, perhaps even talk with him a bit. Perhaps it's childish to be talking to a dead person, but I'm supposed to close someone I love out of my life forever? Not happening.<font>

><font> I still had an hour and a half before my shift was officially over, but that was the good thing about being Commander of my own ship, I could make my own schedule. Besides, if anyone wanted to reach me, they could wake me up like they always do.<font>

><font> I left my study room, guiltily leaving the reports I hadn't looked at since the day before on the desk. I told Cusdo he could contact me if anything new came up, especially any substantial updates from the engine room, and went to my quarters.<font>

><font> I got a record nine hours of sleep that night. At 5 AM, I woke up when my alarm sounded. Relaxed after a night of no interruptions, I showered, dressed, ate, and was on the bridge by six.<font>

><font> "Any updates from engineering?" I asked the morning crew.<font>

><font> Cala-Dapare-Malian, an <em>aristh<em> who'd joined the crew just days before we'd refused to carry out the electorate's orders to kill Jake and Cassie, handed me a pad.

><font> Yes, Commander. Here's their hourly updates. &gt;<font>

><font> I took the pad and scanned it quickly. Everything right on schedule. Another pleasant change that morning. Regular engines were completely fixed, Z-Space engines were 10% from full capacity. Weapons at 75%, expected to be at 85% by eight.<font>  
><font> "Cool," I said, "I guess we just wait here for two hours until the Star Fire lets us go."<font>  
><font> I read the reports I'd been neglecting for two days for an hour and a half, but returned to the bridge at 7:30 when the 'command crew', Alaxi, Cusdo and the others, came on duty.<font>  
><font> T.O. Vestef will be contacting us with last minute instructions in 19 minutes, &gt; Trax said as he took his station. The Star Fire shall contact us in 24. &gt;<font>  
><font> "Engine room ready to give us as much power as possible as soon as possible?"<font>  
><font> Affirmative, &gt; Randgal said.<font>  
><font> "Fighters?"<font>  
><font> All the pilots are on alert, one quarter are in the fighter bays, ready to fly if the need arises, &gt; Alaxi said.<font>

><font> "It's all up to Trana, then," I said, and sat back to wait the 15 minutes before Vestef contacted us.<font>  
><font> At 7:50 exactly, Vestef contacted us. He explained in detail exactly what was going to happen. Basically, the Star Fire would release us, Marco and I would haul butt out of there, the Nebula Striker would cover us. "Rebels" on the Star Fire would try to get to fighters and follow us. Of course, I wasn't content to just run, that's why I had all my pilots on alert so they could help cover us if necessary. Marco was probably doing the same thing.<font>

><font> At 7:55, the Star Fire contacted us, telling us to prepare to be released, then be re-teathered. Marco and I played the part of beaten captives, ready to follow Trana's every command.<font>

><font> I felt a slight lurch shudder through the ship and nodded to Cacitini to get us away as fast as possible. He pushed a few buttons on his console and we sped away from the Star Fire and Earth faster than we had moved in six months.<font>

><font> Star Fire is powering weapons, &gt; Alaxi reported. Nebula Striker is firing on the Star Fire! Star Fire has launched...11 fighters, they aren't firing any weapons or being fired at, they must be our allies. &gt;<font>

><font> "Put it on the screen," I said. A moment later, the image changed from being a blank wall to showing the Tiger Fist to the right and slightly behind us and the shrinking forms of the Nebula Striker, Star Fire and minute fighters. Really, I wasn't interested in that. My gaze was fixed on Earth. My home planet. The planet where I'd fought and nearly died more than once. The planet where Tobias made the ultimate sacrifice.<font>

><font> "Good bye," I mouthed silently as we retreated from Earth.<font>

><font> Two ships heading on an intercept course! &gt; Trax announced with tension in his voice. A Dome Ship and a large fighter of unknown classification. &gt;<font>

><font> "You mean they came up with a new ship in six months?!"<font>

><font> Apparently, Commander. &gt;<font>

><font> "Get me Marco."<font>

><font> The screen promptly changed from showing the tiny figures of the Star Fire, Nebula Strike, and other ships who'd joined the

fighter to Marco. His jaw looked much better, just slightly swollen. My stomach did a slight flip flop as I remembered the promise I'd made, but I quickly smothered the feeling. This was no time to be thinking about stuff like that.<font>

><font> "What the hell is that ship?" I demanded.<font>

><font> "Which one?" he asked.<font>

><font> "The one that isn't a Dome Ship. You've been hanging here for awhile, hear anything about it?"<font>

><font> "I think it's an experimental fighter. Pulsar class. Other than that, no idea."<font>

><font> I turned back to my crew. "Trax, do some very quick scans. Find out it's weapons capacity and if we can fight it. Cacitini, how long until they reach us?"<font>

><font> Five minutes. &gt;<font>

><font> "How long until we can jump to Z-Space?"<font>

><font> Six minutes. &gt;<font>

><font> "Damn!"<font>

><font> I have the report, Commander, &gt; Trax said. There's no way the Talon Claw could fight it. Even the TalonClaw and TigerFist together would find it almost impossible to defeat. &gt;<font>

><font> "What if we launched fighters?"<font>

><font> We could buy ourselves time, perhaps. &gt;<font>

><font> "Let's do it," I said and started to follow Alaxi to the fighter bay.<font>

><font> "Rachel! Where're you going?" Marco asked.<font>

><font> "Where do you think, Marco? Where should I be in a battle?"<font>

><font> "You're insane, Rachel!"<font>

><font> "I know," I called over my shoulder and nodded to Trax to cut the connection.<font>

><font> Alaxi hadn't stopped when I did to talk to Marco, so by the time I got to the fighter bay, all the fighters were gone except for one. I ran to it and quickly got it ready to launch.<font>

><font> "Five...four...three...two...one," I counted down quietly then hit the button to open the bay doors and was out of there!<font>

><font> Clear of the TalonClaw, I steered my fighter towards the pulsar class ship. Once I had it in view, I saw my fighters and the TigerFist's fighters swarming the ship, like ants around a piece of fruit. The ship wasn't even attempting to shoot at the fighters, why? Not maneuverable enough? No weapons placed in areas that would be able to reach the fighters?<font>

><font> Oh, well, not time to worry about that, I had a battle to joined.<font>

><font> As I powered up my weapons and prepared to fire, I caught a flash of shredder fire before I found myself spinning wildly.<font>

><font> As I tried to right the ship, I heard dozens of thought speak warning flashing through my head.<font>

><font> Left engine failed. &gt;<font>

><font> Left weapons array destroyed. &gt;<font>

><font> Life support ending in one minute. &gt;<font>

><font> I could already feel the air in the fighter getting thinner. I was beginning to loose consciousness when I heard a voice come over the communications system.<font>

><font> "Rachel! Rachel, is that you? Answer me, dammit!"<font>

><font> "Yes," I said softly, then drifted into black.<font>

The next thing I knew, I was in a medical bay with several Andalites and Marco hovering over me.

><font> "Where the hell am I and what am I doing here?" I demanded, trying to sit up, but the Andalites held me down.<font>

><font> "You're in the TigerFist's medical bay," Marco explained.

"That Dome Ship hit your fighter, knocking out your left engine, left weapons array and life support systems. We tractored you in just seconds before the system stopped entirely. You've been unconscious for nearly half a day."<font>

><font> "Where are we now? Did we get away?"<font>

><font> "Yeah, both our ships are orbiting an uninhabited planet a few light years from Earth's solar system. Your crew knows where you are and Cusdo's in charge of the ship."<font>

><font> I tried to sit up, when the doctors tried to stop me, I pushed them away. "I'm fine. I'm not going to stay here in some med bay when absolutely nothing is wrong with me." I swung my legs off the bed and stood up. Well, tried to, anyway. As soon as I put my weight on my legs, they collapsed and I fell, only to be caught by Marco, who helped me back up on the bed.<font>

><font> "Still think you're fine?" He asked with a smirk.<font>

><font> "I should at least be on my own ship!"<font>

><font> "Cusdo can handle everything there just fine," Marco reassured me. "Since no one here has come up with a wheel chair, there's no way you can cross the entire ship in your condition. However, I arranged for you to have some quarters just down the hall."<font>

><font> "And how am I gonna get there if I can't even stand?"<font>

><font> "It's close, I'll carry you."<font>

><font> "Marco, I'm still way taller than you, there's no way you could carry me."<font>

><font> "Wanna bet? Lay down and I'll pick you up."<font>

><font> Sure that Marco wouldn't be able to hold me, but willing to at least give it a try, I laid down. He slid one arm under my knees and another under my back and, to my surprise, lifted me easily.<font>

><font> "Told ya' I could," he said.<font>

><font> "Don't know why I ever doubted you," I said as I wrapped an arm around his neck so I felt more secure.<font>

><font> Slowly, carefully, Marco carried me out of the medical bay to quarters just down the hall.<font>

><font> "And just how long do I have to stay here?" I asked as he laid me down on the bed.<font>

><font> He leaned down and gave me a kiss on the forehead, probably afraid I'd hit him again if he tried anywhere else. "The doc said at least a day." I moaned. "And then, when you go back to your ship, you have to spend another day resting."<font>

><font> "What?! I don't think so! Besides, your doctor can't order me, I'm not a crew member on this ship."<font>

><font> "True, but as we speak, my doctor is contacting your doctor telling him what state you're in." I groaned. "It's no use complaining, nothing is going to change their minds."<font>

><font> "Fine. At least let my contact my own crew."<font>

><font> "Not untill you can walk to the message board yourself."<font>

><font> I considered trying to walk again, but thought better of it. I didn't need to show off my weakened state. "This sucks."<font>



><font> Marco laughed slightly, "Rachel, our lives have sucked since we met Elfangor."<font>  
><font> "I'm gonna try and sleep this off," I said. "That seems to be the only thing anybody's willing to let me do."<font>  
><font> "You could uphold your promise for that kiss."<font>

><font> I smiled. "Sure. Why not?"<font>  
><font> He leaned down again and gently kissed me on the lips, and I kissed back. I felt like it was my first kiss all over again. I hadn't kissed somebody since...well, I couldn't remember.<font>

><font> "Get some rest," he told me once we broke apart. "See you later."<font>  
><font> "Yeah," I replied and turned onto my side to sleep.<font>

><font> As I was finally about to drift to sleep, an alarm went off right by my ear.<font>  
><font> "Yah!" I shouted as I bolted upright. "What the hell?"<font>

><font> After a moment I recognized the alert, it was telling everyone to get to their battle stations.<font>  
><font> I pushed back the covers and stood up, keeping a hand on the wall to steady myself. Using the wall as support, I made it to the messageboard and called the bridge.<font>  
><font> "Marco? What the hell is going on?"<font>  
><font> "We have a slight situation here, Rachel," he answered tersely. "Can't talk now."<font>  
><font> "Who's attacking us?"<font>  
><font> "Andalites. Another fleet found us."<font>  
><font> "Damn. Give me a fighter. I'm standing and walking on my own," I liked. "I can take a fighter to my own ship."<font>

><font> "What if you get hit again?"<font>  
><font> "Then I get hit again. It's a risk we'll have to take."<font>

><font> "No, Rachel. You are not going out in the middle of a battle just because you're bored. And you haven't been resting for half an hour, there's no way you're well enough to fly a fighter, let alone command a ship." He cut the connection.<font>  
><font> I tried walking back to the bed on my own, but collapsed after two steps. I pushed myself back up and used the wall to guide myself back to bed.<font>  
><font> I laid back down but couldn't go back to sleep, not with the flashing red lights declaring the ship was still in alert status. The annoying klaxon had stopped, it only goes off for the first minute of alert.<font>  
><font> Just as suddenly as it had started, the alert went off. The lighting returned to normal and the only sound was the gentle hum the engines made.<font>  
><font> I wanted to message Marco again, but just walking across the room had taken alot out of me.<font>  
><font> I was all set to go back to sleep when the message board beeped. Marco's voice came over it, "Rachel? You there?"<font>

><font> I got up and walked across the room as fast as I could, which was two minutes. Normally it would have taken about half of one.<font>  
><font> "Standing and walking on you own, huh?" he asked when I finally answered.<font>  
><font> "I was sleeping again, thank you. What's up?"<font>

><font> "I have good news and I have bad news. Which do you want first?"<font>  
><font> "Good."<font>  
><font> "The good news is that it wasn't a whole fleet that found us, just two science ships. We beat them easy."<font>  
><font> "Then the bad news would be...?"<font>  
><font> "You're gonna be here for an extended stay. Docking and fighter bays on the TalonClaw were severely damaged, making it impossible for you to get over there."<font>  
><font> "Dammit!" I shouted. "This can <em>not<em> be happening! Is the Nebula Striker ever going to catch up with us?"  
><font> "No idea. We don't know if they could get a trace on us."<font>  
><font> "This entire mission was blown from the start. Why did I have to try and be Ja...some great leader and try to rescue you?"<font>  
  
><font> "Because you know you love me. After all, you're a woman and I'm, well, I'm me." He was ignoring, or didn't hear, that I almost said Jake's name.<font>  
><font> I laughed. "Yeah, Marco. Any ways, we just going to wait around here for the Nebula Striker?"<font>  
><font> "That's the plan. I've got probes going down to the planet we're orbiting to see if there's anything to eat down there, supplies are running low over here."<font>  
><font> "Same on the TalonClaw. How are supplies going to get to them if fighter and docking bays are damaged?"<font>  
><font> He seemed to think about that for a moment. "Excellent question. I'll look into it."<font>  
><font> I rolled my eyes. "And once supplies can get on there, let me on too."<font>  
><font> "Sir, yes, sir!" he said with a mock salute.<font>  
><font> I laughed slightly. "I'm going back to sleep. Talk to you later."<font>  
><font> " 'Night, Rachel."<font>  
><font> " 'Night, Marco." I closed the channel and hobbled over to the bed and fell asleep.<font>  
> <p>

I stared out over the alien plain and felt a wave of contentment wash over me as I watched Alaxi's daughter run freely.  
><font> "What're you thinking about?" Marco asked, coming up behind me and putting an arm around my shoulder.<font>  
><font> I jumped a little, "Don't scare me like that!"<font>

><font> "Sorry," he apologized.<font>  
><font> "Just thinking about how we ended up here of all places. Some uninhabited, unexplored planet and we've yet to be found."<font>

We'd waited for the Nebula Striker for over a week, they never came. We assumed they'd lost the battle, lost us, or had been destroyed.

><font> Probes showed that the planet we were orbiting was inhabitable and could give us all the supplies we needed. Since there was no way of getting supplies on to the TalonClaw, we made a hard decision, we'd land the ships and live there, at least for awhile.<font>  
><font> Once both ships were safely landed, I walked out of the TigerFist to wait for my engineers to cut through a wall of the ship.

Not only did I want to see everybody, but if I had to spend one more minute on the TigerFist, I would go insane. I'd practically been confined to quarters during the past week, even though I was completely healthy after two days of rest.<font>

><font> Rachel! &gt; Alaxi shouted as soon as a section of the TalonClaw had been completely cut away.<font>

><font> "Hey, Alaxi!" I called back.<font>

><font> She picked her way over the unfamiliar terrain, probably tasting the grass, to get to me. You okay? &gt; I hadn't talked to her since I was taken aboard the TigerFist. The doctor had only allowed me to make five minute calls to Cusdo to make sure everything was all right on the TalonClaw. Honestly, my mother used to let me do more when I was sick.<font>

><font> "I'm fine, Alaxi. I wish people would stop asking me that, I'm absolutely <em>fine</em>."<font>

><font> Except for your temper, obviously, &gt; she said with a slight smile.<font>

><font> "You try being locked in your quarters for a week and see how your temper is."<font>

><font> Before we landed, the crew was divided into teams, some to look for water, and food for you and Marco, some to gather fire wood, and some to find shelter for the night. &gt;<font>

><font> "Sounds like you've been on top of things. I have no idea whether the TigerFist is that organized because <em>somebody</em> kept me locked up for a week," I glared over my shoulder at Marco.<font>

><font> Alaxi laughed. Come, let's get to work. &gt;<font>

Aunt Rachel! Uncle Marco! Hi! > Alaxi's daughter, Cholay-Rinia-Sareen, called to us when she noticed us standing in the door way of our house.<font>

><font> Yes, <em>our</em>. It was our for two reasons, one, building just one saved on resources, and two, Marco and I were as close to being married as ever would be, there wasn't exactly a church we could go to, so we just lived together and acted as husband and wife.<font>

><font> Cusdo and Alaxi were also "married". Right now, Cholay is the only child in our little colony, but six months after we'd set up camp, a ship of refugees arrived, nearly doubling the size of our settlement.<font>

Commanders? >

><font> I walked to the door and opened it. "What is it, Cusdo?"<font>

><font> I thought you'd like to see this, &gt; he handed me a pad.<font>

><font> I looked over it quickly. "Marco, you might want to look at this." He came over and I handed him the pad.<font>

><font> "Have they found us?" he asked once he'd read it.<font>

><font> Cusdo shrugged. We don't believe the Electorate knows of our location. This is just one older model transport ship. But they're on a direct course for us. &gt;<font>

><font> "So what do we do?" I asked. "If they're military, there's nothing we can do."<font>

><font> "I guess we just sit back and wait," Marco said.<font>

><font> I wanted to argue, but couldn't. We didn't have any ships capable of fighting anything. If this was the enemy...well, i guess I'd get to see Tobias, Cassie and Jake again.<font>

><font> Three days later, the answer of who was on the transport was answered: refugees from the Andalite Home world. All of them escaped political prisoners. According to them, the electorate had gone mad wanting to destroy the Yeerks. When anybody tried to speak out against their actions, they were jailed.<font>  
><font> "Communists," Marco said when he heard this. "The Andalites have become Communists."<font>

The refugees from that transport had paired up and were starting families here. Several children were expected in the coming months, along with more refugees, and one human child.

><font> In three months, Marco and I would be the parents of the first human born into freedom for nearly a decade. I felt how Jara Hamee and Ket Halpak must have felt when we'd freed them. We were billions of miles from our home, and our child could very well be the last free one of it's species. Unlike the Hork-Bajir, we couldn't stage raids to free other humans. We just had to hope that the Electorate regained it's sanity and finished off the Yeerks, at least, those on Earth.<font>

><font> Oh, Mother and Father wanted me to get you two. Go to our scoop, they have something to show you, &gt; Cholay said.<font>

><font> "Okay," I said. "We'll be right there." Cholay continued on her run while Marco and I started walking towards Alaxi's and Cusdo's scoop.<font>

><font> Their scoop was only a few hundred yards away, but it took us nearly ten minutes to get there. It's impossible to walk fast when you have a stomach the size of a beach ball.<font>

><font> "What is it, Alaxi?" I asked once we reached her and Cusdo's scoop.<font>

><font> We just intercepted an Andalite transmission, &gt; she said excitedly. Here, watch! &gt; she put a small cylinder in a hole in a message board. We'd taken apart most of the TigerFist and TalonClaw and modified them for personal use.<font>

><font> "A new leader has taken control of the Electorate today. Vestef-Jania-Tolup, formerly Tactical Officer of the ship Nebula Striker. He gave a speech shortly after the results were in." The picture cut from the reporter to Vestef.<font>

><font> "I am thankful for this opportunity to bring about change in our ways. As many of you know, the former Electorate leader became insane in his quest to find the Yeerks. So insane, in fact, that he had two brave and honorable warriors imprisoned and hunted down for their beliefs in right and wrong.<font>

><font> "These two warriors were Commander Marco of the TigerFist and Commander Rachel of the TalonClaw. They and their crews have gone into hiding. Even I, who aided in their escape, do not know of their location. But if you are listening, Rachel and Marco, know this, my first priority is to free your home, and if you wish to come out of hiding, you're free to do so without worry."<font>

><font> The reporter came back on. "Leader Vestef went on to say--" Alaxi turned it off.<font>

><font> We're free again, Rachel. We can return to our home without worrying about being tried for treason. We can live freely among our own people! &gt;<font>

><font> I forced a smile. "This is great!" I wasn't sure if she bought it, though. Although Vestef promised to end the Yeerk's reign on Earth, what were the chances of that happening? But it was a step in the right direction, at least.<font>

><font> So, Commander, what are we going to do? &gt; Cusdo asked. Stay here quietly or contact Vestef? &gt;<font>

><font> "You two go ahead and contact Vestef. Tell him our coordinates and the number of ships we'll need to transport all of us. If any one has a problem with you trying to contact Vestef, tell them the message come straight from Commander Rachel and Commander Marco. While you do that, Marco and I will go tell everyone the news."<font>

><font> "No, Rachel, I'll go tell everyone," Marco interjected. "You're not going to go walking all over the countryside right now."<font>

><font> "I can take care of myself, Marco," I argued.<font>

><font> He gave me a pitiful look. "Please?"<font>

><font> I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Fine. I'm on my way home. You go out. Go talk to everybody. I'll stay home and watch soaps."<font>

><font> He gave me a peck on the cheek, "Thanks."<font>

><font> "Any time," I said, still being sarcastic, and went home.<font>

> <p>

Three weeks later, a fleet of Andalite ships arrived, all ordered to treat us like royalty and bring us back to the Andalite home world.

><font> Naturally, all of us were suspicious. Even those of us who'd worked with Vestef were. How were we supposed to know the Andalites flying us back weren't loyal to the old Electorate and would go on a killing spree?<font>

><font> Luckily, all the crews were sane. None of them even said something negative about us, and only laughed when Cholay was making a nuisance of herself.<font>

><font> One evening on the main Dome Ship in the fleet, Alaxi, Cusdo, Marco's first officer, Capres-Alini-Folia, Marco and myself were in the captain's quarters along with the captain, Fanora-Macell-Lorait.<font>

><font> What changes has Vestef implemented already? &gt; Alaxi asked. We were having a little Q&A session with Fanora. We wanted to know everything we could about the world we were returning to.<font>

><font> Implemented? Few, &gt; Fanora answered. After all, he's only been in power for three weeks. But after organizing forces to protect Earth, he made it easier for females to get into the military.<font>

><font> "No way," I said. "Hundreds of years of oppression and Vestef gets it changed in three weeks?"<font>

><font> His stories of yours and Warrior Alaxi's accomplishments persuaded most of the population that females deserve a place in the military. &gt;<font>

><font> What is he planning on changing? &gt; Cusdo asked.<font>

><font> He wants to encourage acceptance of other species and cultures. Another change influenced by Commander Rachel and Commander Marco. &gt;<font>

><font> "Guess we're just influential people," Marco joked.<font>

><font> Anything else? &gt; Capres asked.<font>

><font> Fanora waved his stalk eyes back and forth, a gesture I'd learned to interpret as 'I don't know'. Vestef keeps all plans secret, except those he is sure will work or he feels strongly about. Such as giving females equality with males. &gt;<font>

><font> "Sounds like Vestef is doing a lot better job than the former

Electorate leader," I said.<font>

><font> Much better, &gt; Fanora assure us. His ideas, while not traditional, may be just the thing to help our<font>

><font>people. &gt;<font>

> <br> Two weeks later, we arrived on the Andalite home world. The base we landed at looked like Times Square used to on New Year's Eve. All the Andalites I'd ever met were always very calm, even in the heat of battle, but these Andalites were, by Andalite standards, having a wild party.

><font> As Marco and I walked down the exit ramp, the crowd parted directly in front of us to allow Vestef and two stern looking Andalites, probably guards, through.<font>

><font> Commander Rachel! Commander Marco! &gt;<font>

><font> "Hey, Vestef," I greeted.<font>

><font> "Hey," Marco said.<font>

><font> Welcome to our planet. I assure you this visit will be more pleasant than your last, &gt; Vestef said with a smile. Come, I have made living arrangements for both of you. Once you have rested, I need to talk to both of you. &gt;<font>

><font> "Why don't we talk now, then?" I suggested. "We've been resting on the ship for two weeks, I need to do something else."<font>

><font> Then follow me. &gt;<font>

><font> We followed Vestef and his two guards to one of the few buildings on the planet. Once in, he led us to a large room with only a table inside.<font>

><font> I apologize for the lack of chairs. I know you're more--&gt;<font>

><font> Marco interrupted him, "We're fine, Vestef. What do you need?"<font>

><font> Your help is required in the final assault at Earth against the Yeerks. As you may have noticed last time you were in the system, there were no ships in orbit around your planet.. We've been able to keep Yeerk forces out of the area, but we feel it's time to end Yeerk control of Earth itself. &gt;<font>

><font> "I couldn't agree more," I said. "What do you want us to do and when?"<font>

><font> We are scheduled to depart for Earth in a week. Ships are being modified for you as we speak. &gt;<font>

><font> "That gives us a month to fight this final battle," Marco said.<font>

><font> I sent him a look. "What do you mean 'a month'? We've got as much time as we need."<font>

><font> "No, we don't, Rachel. Or at least you don't. You're already seven months pregnant, you're not going to be fighting in your ninth month."<font>

><font> "I can take care of myself and our kid, Marco," I growled. "I have done every damn thing you've asked me to for the last seven months, but this is different. This is our home we're talking about, and if you want to keep me from fighting you're welcome to try, but I can guarantee you won't succeed. I'm going to fight in this last battle and there's absolutely nothing you can say to stop me!" By the time I was finished, I was yelling.<font>

><font> Marco looked like he was going to argue with me, but I kept glaring at him and he kept quiet. He knew there was no way to keep me out of this.<font>

><font> I turned to Vestef, who'd been watching our argument in silence. "Maybe I could use a rest. Where are those quarters you had prepared for us?"<font>

><font> He turned to one of his guards, Show the Commanders to their quarters. &gt; The guard nodded and motioned for Marco and I to follow him.<font>  
><font> We were led down a series of hallways before we stopped in front of two doors. The guard motioned us forward, indicating these were ours. I got the feeling this guy didn't like us. Oh, well, I had bigger things on my mind.<font>  
><font> Once I was in my room, I discovered that Marco's and my rooms were connected. Or, more precisely, Marco discovered that by barging into my room.<font>  
><font> "Rachel, we need to talk."<font>  
><font> "If you're going to try and change my mind, no we don't."<font>  
><font> "Fine. I won't try to change your mind. But we do need to talk. Why are you all pissed at me? I'm just trying to look out for you and the baby."<font>  
><font> "Thanks for your concern, Marco, but as I said before, I can take care of myself. Trust me, I'm not going to put myself in immediate danger. No taking out a fighter and fighting a blade ship one on one. And commanding a ship isn't going to hurt the baby."<font>  
><font> I'd sat down on my hard bed while I was talking and Marco came over and sat next to me. "I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt it, but I can't help but worry."<font>  
><font> I smiled. "That's sweet, Marco, and I'm glad you're looking out for us, but you do need to let me live my own life. Okay?" He nodded. "Good, now go back to your own room, I need to get some sleep." He gave me a quick kiss, then left.<font>  
> <p>

"Systems check," I ordered from my command chair.  
><font> All systems are ready, &gt; Alaxi replied from her post next to me.<font>  
><font> We were on the bridge of my new ship, the WolfHawk, named for Cassie and Tobias this time. Most of my crew was new, the old crew opting to retire from the military, but a few stuck around. Cacitini was still at the helm, and Trax still at operations.<font>  
><font> Alaxi was my first officer. Somehow, she convinced Cusdo to stay home with Cholay while she came with me, although with was to be her last military action. I agreed. I was sick of this. Once Earth was free, I wasn't going to fight again.<font>  
><font> "Let's do it, then. Cacitini, set a course for Earth."<font>

After two weeks of sitting on the bridge or in my quarters talking to Marco on his ship, the Tiger, we arrived at Earth.  
><font> When I saw the planet on the screen, emotions I'd kept buried for a year threatened to come out again, but I was prepared this time. And I couldn't allow old wounds to get in the way of the mission. I could feel later, when Earth was free.<font>  
><font> No Yeerk ships are in orbit above the planet, &gt; Trax reported. However, a few hundred bug fighters and two blade ships are detected on the planet itself. WE're too far away to be sure, but preliminary reports show the blade ships are not operational.<font>  
><font> "An entire fleet was needed for this?" I muttered under my breath. Louder, I said, "Take us down to the surface, Cacitini, and relay the order to the other ships, Alia," I said to the new communications officer, one of the first females to join the military under Vestef's changes.<font>

><font> A minute later, I could see other ships in the fleet beginning to descent to the surface, which was getting larger as we also descended. I felt a slight flutter go through my stomach as I realized what we were doing. I would be walking on Earth soil again, breathing Earth air, feeling the warmth of Earth's sun, sensations I hadn't felt for a long time.<font>

><font> We've landed, Commander, &gt; Cacitini announced.<font>

><font> "Order all the warriors to get their weapons together. We need to get off the ship before the Yeerks realize what's going on." Alai nodded and quickly sent the message as the rest of us exited the bridge, including myself. Yes, it was dangerous, but I had to, the WolfHawk would offer little protection parked on the ground, I was better off risking it outside.<font>

><font> When I stepped off the ship, I stumbled a bit and felt a slight bit of pressure. Evidently, Earth's gravity is just slightly greater than that of the Andalite world. Not enough to kill anyone, but enough to notice and take a minute to get used to. Marco and I adapted quicker than the Andalites since this was our natural environment, and went off looking for...well, we weren't sure.<font>

><font> "Where're you going to hid if serious fighting breaks out?" Marco asked as we walked. "There's nothing here to hide you."<font>

><font> I looked around. He was right, Earth looked even bleaker now than it had when we'd left, and there wasn't so much as a shrub in sight.<font>

><font> "We need to bring the fight back near the mountains," I said, pointing back the way we came. "No idea whether they're the mountains we know, I have no idea where we've landed, but there's sure to be an out cropping of rocks I can duck behind if things get too bad."<font>

><font> "Then let's head--Whoa! Watch it!" he said as he grabbed my arm, I'd tripped over something.<font>

><font> "What the hell?" I looked down at what I'd tripped on. It was a small piece of wood, twigs really, My foot had snapped it in half, but I could tell what it had been before I'd tripped. A cross.<font>

><font> "Oh, my God..." I whispered.<font>

><font> "What?" Marco asked. He didn't realize what it was yet.<font>

><font> "We're home, Marco. Really home. This is the grave marker I made for Tobias." Tears were falling down my cheeks, but at least I wasn't in hysterics like I usually was when I was reminded of my friends.<font>

><font> "You sure?"<br> "I'm positive, Marco." I scanned the open filed that had once been dense woods. "See that building over there? The one that's nearly destroyed? That was Cassie's."

><font> "What happened to the Yeerk pool they were supposed to be building here?"<font>

><font> I shrugged. "I don't know, and I don't care. Come on, let's get back to the mountains."<font>

><font> It took nearly three hours to get all of us back near the mountains, and once there, it was only an hour before the first Yeerks arrived.<font>

><font> The Taxxon trackers, who'd been leading several dozen Hork-Bajir and humans were taken out easily by our hand held shredders, but the humans and Hork-Bajir were harder to get. They'd had time to pull out their dracon beams and fire back.<font>



><font> We were able to hold off the first Hork-Bajir and humans with our shredders, but when reinforcements started showing up and you weren't sure if your own weapon and hit an enemy or the warrior at your side, we had to bring out the big guns, shredder cannons.<font>

><font> Basically, they were huge shredders mounted on wheels, but they sure packed a punch. On a good shot, ten controllers could be taken out of the fight.<font>

><font> When the cannons were brought out, I reluctantly ducked behind a large boulder. I sat and listened to the sounds of battle around me as I waited for my shredder to reload. I'd drained nearly all it's power and it would take a minute to recharge.<font>

><font> I didn't have the opportunity to use it again that day, though. With our superior shredder cannons, the surviving Yeerks turned and ran. We knew this wasn't the end, not a chance. But it was a victory, and it felt good to win again.<font>

I fought in minor battles for another month before myself and the doctor took the WolfHawk deep into the mountains where I could be spending a month with just the doctor for company. Being pregnant sucked. Why \_couldn't\_ a stork just drop off kids whenever two people wanted a baby? That way, I'd still be able to fight.

><font> Three weeks later, just about a week early, it happened. I went into labor, and four hours later, I found myself as the mother of an absolutely perfect baby girl.<font>

><font> "Hurry up and try to call Marco on the Tiger," I ordered the doctor once I was holding my daughter in my arms. "Tell him to come here ASAP to meet his daughter."<font>

><font> I was laughing and crying tears of joy when Marco came in two hours later.<font>

><font> "What's her name?" he asked while holding her.<font>

><font> "I was waiting for you to help decide that."<font>

><font> We sat for half an hour debating names. We weren't going to name her after our friends, too many memories that we didn't need every time we talked to her.<font>

><font> "How about Faith?" I suggested.<font>

><font> Marco looked down at our daughter. "Yeah, she looks like a Faith. For a middle name, how about...Joy."<font>

><font> I tried it out. "Faith Joy. I like it."<font>

> <p>

It had taken a year, but we did it. The Yeerks were gone. All the hosts were free, every Kandrona was destroyed, and the Yeerk Pools filled in and entrances sealed.

><font> Marco and I were spending our days trying to find our friends and families, and the families of fellow Animorphs. They deserved to hear what had happened to their children.<font>

><font> We also tried to help other families find each other. The Yeerks hadn't exactly cared about keeping families together, so family members could be spread across the state, country, even world.<font>

><font> Once day, after I'd put Faith down for a nap, there was a knock at the door. Since Marco was out looking for a friend of his, I answered it.<font>

><font> "Can I help you?" I asked the woman who was standing there.<font>

><font> "Rachel?"<br> "Yes." There was something vaguely familiar about this woman, but I couldn't quite place it.

><font> "It's me. Aunt Nikki."<font>  
><font> "Oh, my God! Come in!" I opened the door wider and let her in.<font>  
><font> "Where is he?" she asked right away. "Where's my Jake?"<font>

><font> "Aunt Nikki...here, sit down," I led her to the hard couch that had been left in the house when Marco and I'd found it.<font>

><font> "Rachel, I know he was an Animorph, and that you and Marco freed him, now where is he? Is he somewhere with Cassie?"<font>

><font> <em>I can only hope</em>, I said to myself. "Aunt Nikki...Jake's dead." Her eyes widened with shock. "Shortly after we freed him, Cassie and Ax, Ax disappeared, shortly followed by the re-capturing of Jake and Cassie. We...Marco and I...we weren't able to free them a second time so...in battle we...we had to kill them."

><font> Aunt Nikki was silent for a minute, then started yelling, "No! No! You're lying!" she jumped up from the couch, hysterical, and ran towards the door. "You're lying, Rachel! I'll go find him myself!"<font>

><font> Before she ran out the door, I managed to grab her arm and keep her from doing something stupid.<font>

><font> As I dragged her back to the couch, Marco came back. Simultaneously, Faith woke up crying from Aunt Nikki's hysterics.<font>

><font> "Damn," I cursed, but Faith's crying seemed to calm Nikki down.<font>

><font> "Who's that?" she asked.<font>

><font> "Our daughter, Faith," Marco answered, walking towards the stairs to comfort Faith.<font>

><font> "May I see her?"<font>

><font> "Of course," I said, and allowed her to get up and walk upstairs.<font>

><font> "Who's that?" Marco whispered to me as we walked behind Nikki.<font>

><font> "Jake's Mom," I whispered back. "She didn't exactly take the news of Jake's death well."<font>

><font> "Hello, Faith," Aunt Nikki cooed as she lifted Faith out of the old crib we'd found. For a minute Faith looked like she was going to burst into a new wave of tears at the sight of the strange woman picking her up, but grinned and started babbling away in baby talk.<font>

><font> "She likes you," I said while smiling.<font>

><font> Nikki walked back to Marco and I and handed Faith to me. "I'm sorry for getting upset at you, Rachel. Really, you set Jake free, and for that I'm thankful. I just wish that things hadn't ended that way."<font>

><font> "We feel the same way," Marco assured her.<font>

><font> "I need to return home. Tom and I are looking for my husband."<font>

><font> "Where are you living? Marco and I are trying to reunite people, we could send him to your place."<font>

><font> Nikki wrote her address down on a scrap of paper and left.<font>

><font> "Did you find who you were looking for?" I asked Marco as I laid Faith back down.<font>

><font> "Yes and no, I managed to find my father, your mother and father and sisters."<font>

><font> "But?"<font>

> <font>"But they're all dead."<font>  
><font> "What?!"<font>  
><font> "They've all died. Same with Cassie's family."<font>

><font> We were back down in the living room, I sat down on the couch. "How could they all be dead?"<font>  
><font> Marco sat down next to me. "Rachel, we both knew there was a possibility this could happen."<font>  
><font> "I know, Marco. That doesn't mean I'm going to handle it well though."<font>  
><font> He hugged me close and I hugged back. "I've lost it all, too, Rach. But I still have you and you have me, and we have Faith. As long as the three of us are together, we can make it."<font>

><font> I thought about that for a moment. "You're right, Marco. As long as we have each other, we'll be fine."<font>

### ### Epilogue

I weakly opened my diary and began to write.  
> <br>\_ It's almost time now, I can feel it. It frightens me to no end knowing that I'm almost dead, but at least Faith, Grace and Hope are here with me. Somehow, that makes me feel better, knowing that I won't die alone.\_

\_ \_I laid down the book and pencil, too tired to write. Hope must have seen the fatigue on my face for she gently took one of my hands. I smiled and squeezed her hand reassuringly. Softly, though, I didn't have the strength I once had.  
><font face="Arial,Helvetica"> I heard a voice whisper in my ear softly. "Come on, Rachel, we're all waiting."<font>  
><font face="Arial,Helvetica"> I looked over and saw a human Tobias standing with Cassie, Jake and Marco. I smiled.<font>  
><font face="Arial,Helvetica"> "I'm coming...I'm coming."<font>

\_Author's Notes: I think I successfully combined sappy and dark, don't you? And yes, I know pairing up Marco and Rachel is a little...off, so sue me, it's \_my\_ story and I can do whatever I darn well please with it!!! As always, feed back is appreciated.\_

End  
file.